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RUEHHK/AMCONSUL HONG KONG 9167  
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RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHINGTON DC  
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TAIPEI 000324

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SUBJECT: NO SURPRISES AS BOTH CANDIDATES ACQUIT THEMSELVES  
WELL IN TAIWAN PRESIDENTIAL DEBATE

REF: TAIPEI 262

Classified By: AIT Deputy Director Robert S. Wang,  
Reasons: 1.4 (b/d)

11. (C) Presidential candidates Ma Ying-jeou (KMT) and Frank Hsieh (DPP) held a lively but inconclusive debate on Sunday afternoon, March 9, with supporters of both sides claiming victory. Hsieh focused on cross-strait policy, especially the KMT's "cross-strait common market" concept, while Ma criticized the records of the DPP administration, President Chen, and Hsieh. Local commentators do not expect the debate to change many people's views of the candidates, and public opinion polling suggests Ma continues to maintain a significant lead over Hsieh, less than two weeks before the March 22 election. End Summary.

12. (C) Presidential candidates Ma Ying-jeou (KMT) and Frank Hsieh (DPP) squared off in their second and final media debate on Sunday afternoon, March 9 (reftel). In addition to delivering opening and closing presentations, the two candidates answered 10 questions from 5 media representatives, and took turns asking each other 5 questions. In the first debate the candidates were given the 20 public questions in advance. This time, the media questions were not provided in advance to the candidates, making this event more spontaneous than the first debate. This changed format played to the advantage of Hsieh, who showed off his well-known debating agility and was able to deftly deflect some difficult questions. Hsieh did noticeably better than in the first debate in controlling his time, and he also appeared better prepared than before. Although Ma sounded somewhat scripted at points, he came across as well prepared and in good command of his arguments.

13. (C) Two prominent local political commentators on a television talkshow gave the two candidates roughly equivalent marks for their performances. In their view, the debate would not change the views of supporters of either candidate and would not have much effect on the race. According to media public opinion polling, supporters of each candidate credited their own favorite with victory in the debate by a wide margin. While the majority of media polls indicated that Hsieh improved on his performance from the first debate, the polls split over whether Ma's performance

was better, the same, or worse.

14. (C) The media's questions were broad and covered a variety of topics, including defense, money diplomacy, education, expected inflation, and cross-Strait issues. Ma described his cross-strait economic policy as a long-term, step by step process that was one part of policies aimed at increasing Taiwan's linkages throughout the region and the world. Although critical of the DPP's diplomacy, Ma also took care to strongly criticize PRC efforts to suppress Taiwan internationally. The UN referendum did not come up directly, though Ma referred obliquely to the issue when he criticized the DPP government for damaging the trust of friendly countries with its bids to join the WHO and UN. Both candidates spoke forcefully on the need to maintain Taiwan's defense. In a dig at Ma and his family, Hsieh said, "Taiwan is my only choice -- my family members do not possess foreign passports; my son is serving in the military on Tungyin in Matsu." Hsieh also charged Ma with standing on the wrong side of history by, Hsieh claimed, opposing democratic developments in Taiwan in the past.

15. (C) During the debate segment in which the candidates questioned each other, Hsieh focused on cross-Strait issues, especially the "cross-Strait common market" or "one China market," while Ma argued that Hsieh would be another Chen Shui-bian. Responding to Hsieh's charges that the KMT's cross-Strait policies would compromise Taiwan's interests, Ma stressed that he would not allow the import of PRC labor or restricted agricultural products. Ma also emphasized he would not sell out Taiwan to Beijing, but would definitely sell Taiwan's agricultural products to China. Ma defended the KMT's "one China, different interpretations" policy, and

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suggested that the results of past discussions between the KMT and Beijing would have to be vetted through the Taiwan government to determine if they were in Taiwan's interest before implementation.

16. (C) Hsieh demonstrated his famous cleverness in addressing Ma's questions about his record and that of President Chen. When Ma tried to question his past performance as premier, Hsieh immediately turned the tables and challenged Ma's record as Taipei mayor. When Ma criticized President Chen for too frequent cabinet changes, Hsieh stressed that he himself had been a victim and would not make such frequent changes. In his concluding statement, Hsieh urged voters to treat the presidential election as a referendum on the "one China market" or "common market." Those supporting the concept should vote for Ma, Hsieh said, while those opposed should vote for him.

Comment

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17. (C) While this debate will not in itself play a decisive role in the presidential election, it sets the stage for the next week or more of the campaign. Hsieh will very likely focus heavily on the "one China market" issue, playing up the public's economic and political concerns about KMT policies toward China. The Hsieh camp will hope to convince voters that Ma and the KMT cannot be trusted to protect Taiwan's interests in dealing with Beijing. For their part, Ma and the KMT will continue to hammer the "poor record" of the DPP, President Chen, and Frank Hsieh, arguing that the KMT can substantially increase Taiwan's economic achievements and prosperity. On Friday, March 14, the two candidates will participate in the final round of a series of three policy presentation events (quasi-debates) sponsored by the Central Election Commission.

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